

city dropped to 1,004, an overall loss of only twelve landowners from the year before the riot.⁴⁰

A detailed analysis of the deed books was started by Sue Cody in 2000.⁴¹ Cody sought to find out if blacks owned much land in the city before 1898 and if they were forced to sell their land after the violence for a loss. Because Wilmington was such a large city with a large sample of landowners, even within the African American community, Cody chose to narrow her scope of research by several methods. First, Cody studied deed transactions for African Americans who owned real estate according to the 1897 tax records. She then further limited her study by analyzing property purchases and sales in the seven years prior to the riot and the seven years following the riot for names beginning with A through J. Her initial study led her to conclude that “African Americans owned a significant amount of property both before and after the violence and that there was not a significant spike in the number of sales immediately following the violence.”⁴² Cody further found both gains and losses in the sales of property by African Americans following the riot for all categories of property

holders—banished, voluntary migrants, and those who stayed. Cody’s work was continued for this report from the remainder of the alphabet and the findings were similar.⁴³ The official records do not support a conclusion that Wilmington’s black property owners were forced to sell their holdings en masse in the seven years following the riot, nor did they, on average, lose money when they sold property.

The surviving records, primarily deeds, do not support the claim that was originally made in 1898 and perpetuated into the modern era that whites openly redistributed black property among themselves. However, other, less clear, methods of divesting property from black members of the community should be investigated. One example is that African American and white businesses such as funeral homes and others accepted mortgages for payment from members of the African American community.⁴⁴ If someone defaulted on repayment of the mortgage, the businesses or money lenders could then confiscate the property, sell it, and deduct for their services the amount owed from the sale with the residue going to the borrower who could not pay his debt.

A partial explanation for the property seizure myth may rest in the fact that, after 1898, African American property seized and sold for nonpayment of a debt often would fall into the hands of white purchasers through legal actions. Perhaps such activity evolved into a memory of wide-ranging changes in black ownership of property; that is, a few examples grew to be perceived as the norm instead of the exception.

⁴⁰ Cody, “After the Storm,” 124; New Hanover County Tax Records, 1900.

⁴¹ Cody speculated on how troublesome forgery of the complete set of New Hanover County deed books would be and determined that such an undertaking would be daunting, difficult, and impracticable. Cody, “After the Storm,” 141-2.

⁴² Cody also studied three specific groups of people within the city: men of the Committee of Colored Citizens, those in the culled “A-J” deed list who were out of town at the time their property was sold as well as property transfers of those who were banished. Cody concluded that most of the men of the Committee of Colored Citizens were not affected by property loss after the violence and did not suffer losses as a result of devaluation or sale. Cody’s sample yielded sales for gains and losses by those who left the city following the violence and sold their property from a distance. Cody, “After the Storm,” 119-120, 127, 133.

⁴³ For more details of the deeds analysis, see Cody, “After the Storm” and Appendix L.

⁴⁴ Shaw Funeral Home engaged in such a practice, and its proprietors continued to acquire and sell properties after the turn of the century. A detailed analysis of all of the Shaw deeds would be necessary to determine how many were related to mortgages for repayment of services rendered by the funeral home.